

Ways of Responding

Peter Elbow believes that to "improve your writing you don't need advice about what changes to make; you don't need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people's minds while they read your words" (*Writing Without Teachers*, at 77). Elbow's "movie of the mind" offers an alternative to the ways one approaches providing feedback and responding to texts. Instead of marking up a paper, readers share the story of what happens to them as they read the text. This mode prioritizes the way a piece of writing impacts its reader, as well as how and why these reactions occur.

These suggested "ways of responding" aim to offer a variety of different approaches to help us to re-think our habitual ways of responding to texts. More specifically, these strategies aim to provide writers with more generative and speculative responses to their work; responses that encourage further thinking and further development

Kinds of Responses

(Adapted from Peter Elbow & Pat Belanoff, *Sharing and Responding*)

Sharing (no response): Simply sharing a piece of writing, either by reading it aloud or by distributing the text, is valuable in and of itself. It can prepare for future discussions, allow writers to reflect on their work without worrying about the responses of others, and build rapport among students new to the workshop setting.

Sayback/Summary: Simply having respondents summarize a text or say back what they have just read or heard can be an illuminating exercise. Discrepancies between what the writer "meant to say" and what respondents "heard" are valuable sources of information. They tell writers how their texts are being construed or misconstrued and thus serve as useful guides for revision.

Pointing/Center of Gravity: A "center of gravity" is a specific place in a text that seems especially important interesting, or generative. It is not necessarily the ostensible thesis or main idea. When you ask students to identify centers of gravity, you are asking them to identify potentially rich elements of the text that might be developed further.

What is almost said?: What is almost being said in a given piece of writing? What is "coming through" to the reader that is not being said overtly? Such questions can help writers recognize the full implications of their ideas and identify directions for further development.

What do you want to hear more about?: What do respondents want to hear more about? This question can help writers better understand readers' desires.

Reply: Have respondents to reply to (rather than critique) the text. What are their thoughts on your topic? What are their reactions to your piece of writing? What do they want to say in response?

Voice: In academic writing, students often struggle to find an appropriate voice in their writing (public yet not impersonal or abstract), and it is often helpful to attend directly to this issue. A

discussion of voice can also help writers make important stylistic decisions or recognize and reflect on their attitudes toward their subjects. In addition to helping writers make important stylistic decisions, a discussion focused on the voice, personality, and tone of a text can also help writers more fully recognize their attitudes toward their subjects (Is there a latent sarcasm in the piece? Is the writer guarded or overly deferential? Etc.)

Real-time Responses: Real-time responses are an especially illuminating kind of feedback, because they allow the writer to see the reader's mind in action. Some versions: Have readers narrate their responses paragraph by paragraph. Have respondents mark striking or confusing passages as the writer reads his or her text aloud.

Metaphorical Descriptions: Inexperienced writers and readers often lack a detailed vocabulary for talking about their texts. Having students describe their texts and responses in metaphorical terms can provide them with an indirect way of communicating things they might not otherwise be able to express. (If this piece of writing were an animal, what would it be and why? Etc.)

Believing and Doubting: These exercises are a great way to help writers identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Students (and instructors!) are typically much more adept at doubting than believing, so it is important to strive for balance. Remember that in revision building on strengths is as important as remedying faults or weaknesses. Some variants: reading charitably vs. reading skeptically; reading generously vs. reading critically; reading to understand vs. reading to engage.

Descriptive Outline: Have respondents sequentially note (verbally or in writing) the content and function of each segment of a text (what it says, what it does). This exercise is a very effective way of helping writers make decisions about the relationship between structure and content. It can be employed at a variety of levels: sentence by sentence within a paragraph, paragraph by paragraph within a larger section, section by section within an entire piece. It is most effective when the number of segments is kept relatively low. (Don't ask students to proceed paragraph by paragraph if you want them to consider the structure of a 20-page article comprising 75 paragraphs. Instead, ask them to break the text into larger sections.)

Directed (Criterion-Based) Feedback: Ask respondents to attend to specific features of the text or provide them with direct questions to answer. Questions can originate with the writer, another respondent, or the instructor, and may address any aspect of the text. When framing criteria or questions, you must decide whether they should be about the writer or the writing.

Direct Advice or Critique: Invite respondents to make direct criticisms of a piece or to offer direct advice to a writer. This approach can elicit insightful and incisive responses, but it can also seem threatening to some students.

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